

Trim Budget, Gear Up For School With Family Meals

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Family meals are so worth it! Worth the time, worth the effort and can even help to trim the family budget. With summer winding down and our schedules shifting back into a routine, now is a great time to adjust your schedule to include as many family meals as possible. Set a realistic goal. If one family meal a week is the best you can do, make the most of it. Then challenge your family to add a second family meal the next week.

Keep it simple and keep the focus on having fun together as a family. Start by doing a little detective work. Find out each family member's favorite meal. Perhaps you have a family sleuth who would enjoy carrying out this investigation and then reporting back to you his or her findings. Then make a plan that will rotate the family favorites.

Making a meal plan can save time and money. When you decide "What's for dinner?" in advance, you can be prepared with the ingredients you need avoiding costly last minute trips to the store or fast food drive bys. Often you can do some of the preparation the night before while the kids are doing homework at the kitchen table. Cooking seems like less of a chore when you have a plan.

Preparing healthy kid-friendly meals at home sets a positive example for making good food choices and children begin to learn basic food preparation skills. Young children feel important and valued when asked to help with family meals. Your child learns even when tasks aren't perfectly done. You may be able to work faster alone but get your kids involved. Even picky eaters are more likely to eat the food that they have helped choose and prepare.

Perhaps you have a budding event planner you could put in charge of a theme night – making paper placemats and planning a special centerpiece. A stack of new school supplies could be the center of a back-to-school theme night. A good conversation starter might be "What do you look forward to on the first day of school and why?" or "If you could be principal for a day, what changes would you make?"

A simple menu, keeping with the back-to-school theme, could be this new take on peanut butter sandwiches. Add a favorite soup and nonfat milk.

Peanut Butter Pita Pockets

2 apples, pears, bananas, peaches, or mangoes

2 medium whole wheat pita pockets

1/4 cup peanut butter

Directions:

1. Wash and slice fruit
2. Cut pitas in half to make 4 pockets
3. Warm each pita half in the microwave for about 10 seconds to make them more flexible.
4. Carefully open each pocket and spread about 1 tablespoon of peanut butter on the inside walls of each pita half. You may need to warm the peanut butter in the microwave a few seconds, especially if it has been in the refrigerator.
5. Fill each pocket with sliced fruit.

Serving size: 1/2 sandwich - serves 4

Eating together as a family as often as possible is important for growing families. The list of benefits of family meals continues to grow and includes promoting a healthy weight in young children and nurturing

healthy lifestyles in older children. Studies also show that children who eat regular family meals eat more of what is good for them: fruits, vegetables, grains and calcium-rich foods.

August is Family Meals Month. It is a great time to tame the hectic family schedule and bring your family together for as many meals as possible. Show that family meals are important. During mealtime, turn off the TV, let voice mail take your phone calls, and eat around a table. It is easier to talk and listen when you face each other. Make pleasant conversation and include everyone.

Have a question? Contact the University of Florida IFAS - Leon County Extension office at 606-5203, weekdays 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m.

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